UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1993/86
15 June 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1993
Geneva, 28 June-30 July 1993
Item 4 (c) of the provisional agenda*

COORDINATION QUESTIONS: INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATICS

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In resolution 1991/70, the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General to prepare, within existing resources and in consultation with representatives of States, a study analysing the causes of the current situation with respect to United Nations informatics systems and providing an outline of a rapid solution to the problem, leading to easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access to United Nations computerized databases and information systems and services.

2. In response to Council resolution 1991/70, the Secretary-General submitted his report on the harmonization and improvement of United Nations informatics systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States (E/1992/78), which, in addition to containing an analysis of the causes of the current situation, summarized the results of a questionnaire submitted to all missions of Member States in New York and Geneva, and described in detail the status of the most-requested United Nations databases. In addition, the report identified problems still to be addressed, namely, the need for user-friendly access, the need for a continuous flow of information to Member States, the need to provide easier physical access to databases, the need for training and (last but by no means least) the need for policy coordination and the need to expand the on-line access process beyond the Organization to the United Nations system as a whole.

3. At its substantive session of 1992, the Economic and Social Council adopted resolution 1992/60. In that resolution the Council stressed the priority that it attached to easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access for States Members of the United Nations and for observers to the growing computerized databases and information systems and services of the United Nations, and reiterated the urgent need for representatives of States to be closely consulted and actively associated with the respective executive and governing bodies of the concerned United Nations institutions, such as the International Computing Centre (ICC) and the Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems (ACCIS).

4. In resolution 1992/60, the Economic and Social Council called for the urgent implementation of measures, if necessary in a phased programme, in order to achieve the above-mentioned access to United Nations computerized databases and information systems and services. Also in that resolution, the Council requested that the initial phases of that action programme be implemented from within existing resources and in full consultation with the representatives of States, and requested the Secretary-General to report on the follow-up action taken on that resolution to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1993.

5. Finally, the Council, in the same resolution, called upon Member States to pursue similar actions in the governing bodies of the specialized agencies within which they were represented.

II. DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES OF ORGANIZATIONS AND AGENCIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

6. All organizations and agencies of the United Nations system were contacted and requested to supply a brief description of the efforts that they had expended to make electronic information readily available to Member States, as well as of those that were being planned for the near future. From the responses received, it was clear that all the organizations were acutely aware of the need to use up-to-date dissemination techniques. References to CD-ROM (compact disk, read only memory) were especially prevalent, and among the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system that indicated that they were currently using or planning to augment their use of CD-ROM were: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Telecommunication Union, as well as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and other United Nations offices. (Specific details on the material available or being made available on CD-ROM are given below in discussions of the dissemination activities of individual organizations.) While these CD-ROMs encompass a wide and varied range of material, they tend to fall into two broad categories of information - bibliographic material and material related to the substantive work of a given organization.

7. In addition to an augmented use of CD-ROM, several organizations noted the trend towards an increasing dependence on communications technology, that is, bulletin boards for broadcast announcements, electronic mail (e-mail) for informal correspondence and exchange of text and dissemination of information (much of which related to "active", current material) and use of public data networks, such as the International Project Management Association (INTERNET), which is a network of networks originally created to link university and other research entities for purposes of information-sharing. INTERNET has grown to link several thousand computer nodes in many countries and in many disparate organizations, and has expanded to serve many organizations beyond its original customer base. Several United Nations organizations have become INTERNET nodes, among which are ICC, ITU, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), WHO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the New York Computer Section at United Nations Headquarters.

8. The newly established Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis of the United Nations Secretariat has proposed developing, in cooperation with the regional commissions, an economic and social information system (UNESIS) covering economic and social data collection, processing, storage and dissemination. The diverse body of economic and social information compiled collectively by the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis and the regional commissions is one of the riches of the United Nations. One of the main objectives of the new information system, which will include databases, data-processing software and communications networks to exchange data, is to improve access as a service provider for the Department's outside partners, including Member States and the general public. The approach proposed is a modular one, so that initial investments can achieve some early

pay-offs in terms of increased productivity, better data and improved timeliness.

9. While this modular system is under development, a number of efforts to enhance on-line access to international statistical data are under way. For example, the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat, in cooperation with the World Bank, is working on a more user-friendly front window to its Compressed International Trade Database (COMTRADE) for international trade statistics. Efforts to improve the COMTRADE statistics are being made by the Statistical Division working with GATT, IMF, the World Bank, UNCTAD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Statistical Office of the European Economic Community (EEC). As with other actions directed at enhancing on-line access, a principal constraint is the availability of resources for database adaptation, systems work and servicing of a large body of users in an interactive mode.

10. Dissemination efforts based on CD-ROM technology are being undertaken at the United Nations by the Office of Legal Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, which is studying the feasibility of putting the entire United Nations Treaty Series on CD-ROM. The Statistical Division, which increasingly is providing its databases in machine-readable form, has completed first-round testing of a prototype CD-ROM issue of the Statistical Yearbook, which comprises data from over 30 different statistical databases in the United Nations system. It is expected that the Statistical Yearbook CD-ROM will be released for general use and sale before the end of 1993.

11. The optical disk system being implemented by the Office of Conference Services of the United Nations Secretariat has reached the point where, from August 1993 forward, full text of all documents produced in Geneva and New York will be stored on-line. Now in its second phase of implementation, the optical disk system will become increasingly available to permanent missions to the United Nations of Member States in New York and Geneva, as the capacity of the system is gradually expanded to service a growing number of users.

12. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat has an important responsibility for informing the international community about ongoing natural disasters and/or man-made emergency situations. For this purpose, situation reports and consolidated inter-agency appeals for humanitarian assistance are periodically issued by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs has developed and operates a computer network, known as the United Nations International Emergency Network (UNIENET), to disseminate these documents and other related information (for example, bulletin boards and address directories) by electronic means.

13. UNCTAD has been very successful in the dissemination of personal computer (PC)-based information systems. Three years ago, jointly with the World Bank, UNCTAD disseminated its Trade Control Measures Information System through the System for Market Analysis and Restrictions to Trade (SMART) project. A pilot version of the Trade Analysis and Information System (TRAINS) was launched on a wide scale in May 1992, and this year an improved version of TRAINS, covering about 40 markets, will be available on CD-ROM.

14. Organizations from various Member States dealing with disaster management and the provision of humanitarian assistance have access to UNIENET and use it actively to correspond with and receive information from the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. Several other organizations have agreed to place additional information services on UNIENET and the number of network users, involving both industrialized and developing countries, is steadily growing. The permanent missions of Member States in Geneva are particularly interested in using the services offered by UNIENET.

15. Some of the databases of WHO are already available externally via telecommunications as well as on CD-ROM or diskette. For example, the WHO Library Information System Office of Library Health Literature Services in Geneva can be accessed remotely via telecommunications to obtain bibliographic information on WHO's documents and publications. For those Member States with access to public data networks, WHO's bibliographic information can be accessed at a reasonable cost.

16. WHO is about to undertake a collaborative effort in order to provide easier and cost-effective remote access for more of its databases, and will use INTERNET for this purpose. The first substantial use of INTERNET will be to provide external access to WHO's Mortality Database. This will require the redesign of the Mortality Database, which is to be done jointly with the consortium for the International Earth Science Information Network in the United States of America, for the purpose of structuring it within a client/server environment and of implementing a new user interface for it. The time needed to redesign and make available the Mortality Database via INTERNET is estimated to be one year because of the extensive work involved. Using the facilities available on INTERNET, WHO will begin to experiment with mechanisms for external access to other databases.

17. The use of CD-ROM technology to disseminate selected contents of WHO's databases is seen as a cost-effective means, for those Member States that do not have available affordable telecommunications facilities, to access this information. In Latin America, the Regional Office for the Americas is already disseminating selected bibliographic information on CD-ROM media to Member States. WHO is investigating the possibility of collaboration with other United Nations organizations in the pooling on a CD-ROM disk of some of their databases with those of WHO. Another possibility being investigated is to conclude a licensing agreement whereby a CD-ROM publishing firm would produce CD-ROM disks containing some of WHO's databases and WHO would be granted a certain level of free distribution of disks.

18. FAO coordinates two worldwide cooperative systems: AGRIS (International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology) and CARIS (Current Agricultural Research Information System). Member countries participate, on a voluntary basis, in national centres that are responsible for inputting country data into the system, and in turn they have access to information submitted by others. There are now 173 national, regional and international centres that are members of the AGRIS network and 135 that are members of CARIS.

19. AGRIS is available on-line via three major hosts - DIALOG (Dialog Information Services, Inc.), DIMDI (Deutsches Institut für Medizinische

Dokumentation und Information 1/) and ESA-IRS (European Space Agency Information Retrieval Service), and, in addition, the participating centres are entitled to receive, free of charge, the whole or part of the database on magnetic tape. All AGRIS participating centres have been receiving AGRIS CD-ROM disks free of charge, and FAO is providing training. AGRIS CD-ROM is also available at a very reasonable price and is offered at a 50 per cent discount to developing countries. The next step will be to make the CARIS database available on CD-ROM.

20. The FAO World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT) will become operational in December 1993. Launched in 1987, WAICENT was intended to provide FAO member Governments, research institutes, universities and private users with electronic access to a vast repository of information on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, nutrition and rural development. WAICENT will permit the streamlining of FAO's information-gathering and dissemination activities, enabling the Organization to shift resources to assist its member countries in enhancing the quality and availability of the information that they collect and process. WAICENT will make information available (initially in three languages - English, French and Spanish) in a variety of ways: through floppy disks, CD-ROM disks, mainframe tapes and on-line access.

21. FAO maintains a database of its publications and documents produced both at headquarters and in the field; and the production of this database on CD-ROM is planned, so as to facilitate access by Member States.

22. ILO was the first United Nations organization to computerize the holdings of its library. Initial attempts to increase availability of information centred around the International Labour Documentation (LABORDOC) database, which contains bibliographic information and abstracts describing the holdings of the library and all ILO publications and documents. LABORDOC has been installed, since the 1970s, on a number of commercial and non-profit hosts in order to provide easier and cheaper access for institutions in Member States.

23. ILO's main statistical database (LABORSTA) is available on-line at the International Computer Centre in Geneva; subsets are also available on diskette from the ILO's Bureau of Statistics, as are a number of specialized databases developed by the Bureau to expand the International Labour Office's knowledge base in areas in which regular reporting of national statistics is not yet feasible, for example, child labour, education levels and employment, wage differentials and poverty.

24. The statistical annex to the ILO's annual publication, the World Labour Report, is also available on diskette. ILO is examining the possibilities of disseminating all its statistical data through the Socioeconomic Timeseries Access and Retrieval System (STARS) package developed by the World Bank, as the use of a single package to disseminate data would make it easier for users in Member States to access data from the United Nations system as a whole.

25. The ILO International Occupational Safety and Health Information Centre (CIS) was organized in 1959 to collect and disseminate information that would contribute to the prevention of accidents and diseases in the workplace. Its bibliographic references now number 40,000. They have been available through public data networks for over 10 years and on compact disk for five. In the

last three years, CIS has engaged in capacity-building projects that have enabled appropriate institutions in many Member States to access a broad range of electronic sources, including those of ILO. CIS has national focal points in 70 countries, developing and industrialized; several of these provide access to data from CIS and other sources to users at national and regional levels.

26. ILO has recently published, in English, French and Spanish, a full-text database on international labour standards and their application (ILOLEX) on a single compact disk. ILOLEX contains 37,000 documents including ILO conventions and recommendations, the ILO Constitution and reports of committees charged with supervising the application of those documents. Other full-text databases, on CD-ROM or on diskette, will follow this first product. Efforts are under way to seek partners to support the installation of ILOLEX in all ILO member States.

27. In January 1992, UNESCO created a Clearing-House Centre, the main objective of which is to ensure wider, efficient and economical dissemination of UNESCO databases - on-line and on CD-ROM. The UNESCO bibliographic database (UNESBIB) is housed on two host systems: that of the Commission of the European Communities (ECHO) located in Luxembourg, and that of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. The only charges are for telecommunications costs. In 1993, UNESCO will issue a CD-ROM containing the updated versions of 10 different databases.

28. Industrial and technological information is actively being disseminated to United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) member States, primarily through UNIDO's Industrial and Technological Information Bank (UNTIB), via a network of over 75 national and regional focal points designated by Member States. These operate a national network programme, permitting additional parties to utilize UNTIB information.

29. WIPO publishes its trade-mark registration information (Read-Only-Memory of Madrid Actualized Registry Information (ROMARIN)) on a monthly basis on CD-ROM, as well as a weekly bulletin on patent applications (ESPACE WORLD) and the International Patent Classification Cumulative and Linguistic Advanced Search System (IPC-CLASS), which contains, inter alia, the full text of the last three versions of the International Patent Classification. Future plans, of more direct interest to Member States, include making the texts of industrial property laws and treaties available on CD-ROM.

30. Once the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations is concluded and approval received from the contracting parties, GATT is planning to make available a selected series of documents and tariffs/trade-related information on-line as well as on CD-ROM.

31. The World Food Programme (WFP) is participating in the international Emergency Readiness and Response Information System coordinated by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat within the framework of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The purpose of the project is to provide States Members of the United Nations, and organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, as well as non-governmental organizations, with easy access to information on worldwide emergencies. Plans are under way for offering direct access to a basic database

networking with other databases such as the WFP International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS).

32. A PC software package, the Food Aid Information System (FAIS), was developed in 1992 for use in WFP country offices to monitor food aid flows from all sources. The system is compatible with and linked to the WFP INTERFAIS system operated by WFP headquarters. The FAIS system offers to food aid recipient countries direct access to computerized information previously stored exclusively at ICC in Geneva. WFP has also developed, together with UNDP and UNESCO, a common software package to register and share public information material (films, television programmes) that, on request, is made available to member States on PC diskettes.

33. Four of IMF's main databases are available in machine-readable form. Monthly computer tapes contain the economic time-series appearing in the corresponding publication, but generally with more extensive time coverage. The tapes contain three programmes for selecting and printing the time-series, along with documentation and instructions on how to retrieve the data and use the programmes. International Financial Statistics (IFS) is also available on CD-ROM, and shows a greater degree of precision in this format than in the printed issues.

III. ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS THE NEED FOR A CONTINUOUS FLOW OF INFORMATION

34. Consultations with representatives of Member States have highlighted the fact that in addition to the traditional information supplied by the various organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, missions have a need for the kind of information that cuts across agency lines and by its very nature undergoes constant revision. Such information includes press releases from all organizations and agencies, lists of documents issued, meeting schedules and agendas, text of resolutions and rosters of senior officials.

35. Because there is a need to coordinate the design and implementation of the collection in electronic form of this kind of information, the secretariat of ACCIS has included this item in the agenda of its seventh session, to be convened in Geneva in September 1993, where it can be fully discussed by representatives of all the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system.

36. Another activity undertaken in response to the needs expressed in Economic and Social Council resolutions 1991/70 and 1992/60 was the creation by ACCIS of a prototype information module on the United Nations system under the rubric UN-EARTH. This information, disseminated on diskette and made available on INTERNET by UNDP, is a snapshot of general information about each of the United Nations organizations and agencies. ICC, in collaboration with ACCIS, is exploring the possibility of putting this material on-line. It should be noted that at this time UN-EARTH is a prototype, and detailed planning and costing for the expansion and continuous updating of the information are not yet in place. Response to the prototype has been quite positive, and accentuates a need for up-to-date information on the organizations and agencies of the United Nations

system that cannot be provided by the usual printed directories, which are quickly out of date.

IV. ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS THE NEED FOR TRAINING

37. The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) has been especially responsive to the needs of missions for information and training. In October 1992, UNITAR sponsored a one-day forum in Geneva which was attended by more than 100 representatives of 56 permanent missions and 12 organizations and agencies. Representatives of the United Nations, from both Headquarters and Geneva, and of ICC, ACCIS, WIPO and ITU, gave presentations in a varied agenda that included such topics as the information requirements of the permanent missions to the United Nations, an overview of the role of telecommunications in accessing United Nations information systems, a profile of United Nations library, public information and statistical databases, profiles of ICC and the New York Computing Section, profiles of ITU and WIPO information systems, and the roles of ACCIS and UNITAR.

38. The second forum, chaired by a member of the diplomatic community and attended by 60 representatives of 40 missions and several organizations and agencies, took place in April 1993 and featured an introduction to INTERNET.

39. The April 1993 forum also included an introduction to the Telecommunications Information Exchange Services system (TIES) of ITU, which has provided several telecommunications services to the Geneva diplomatic community. In addition to access to INTERNET, this system, established for internal use in ITU, includes access to ITU databases, document exchange via e-mail, file transfer, and videotex-style information such as the ITU directory of telecommunications organizations and telecommunications terminology.

40. UNITAR has designed a training programme for missions that focuses on computer literacy and access and the use of United Nations information systems. These courses on computer literacy commenced in Geneva in June 1993 in cooperation with ITU, ICC and other United Nations organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, and the Pace University Computer Learning Center in New York. Plans are being finalized to accommodate the various needs and levels of proficiency of the permanent missions to the United Nations. Training in New York is expected to commence in September 1993.

41. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library at United Nations Headquarters in New York and the library at the United Nations Office at Geneva regularly offer training programmes for missions and other users desiring access to the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS) housed at ICC in Geneva and at the New York Computer Section in New York.

42. UNCTAD provides on-site training in the installation, operation and management of various software packages, notably the Automated System of Customs Data Entry, Control and Management (AYSCUDA) and SMART. (On each of these two, over 40 courses have been given.) In addition to presenting these courses in Member States, UNCTAD has organized similar sessions in Geneva for representatives of permanent missions to the United Nations and other officials of developing countries.

V. ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS THE NEED FOR USER-FRIENDLY, EASY ACCESS

43. In an effort to provide a simplified, one-step procedure by which missions in Geneva can gain access to both ICC and the New York Computer Section (NYCS), it has been agreed that ICC will act as the contact point for NYCS users in Geneva. To facilitate this, NYCS has provided ICC with 50 generic user identifications for missions that request NYCS access, and the ICC help desk has been given authority to reset passwords for Geneva missions. When a mission in Geneva requests information concerning access to NYCS, ICC manages the entire process. A brief tutorial is given on how to access the NYCS system and user guides for the main NYCS-housed databases are distributed. Once a mission has access to the systems, the ICC help desk continues to function as the Geneva focal point for questions regarding both NYCS and ICC usage.

44. Because 21 organizations and agencies are already full participants, and because ICC houses many of the databases to which Member States desire access, ICC is logically a critical node in the United Nations system, providing a natural focal point for implementation of such desiderata as a single gateway to the many information systems in the United Nations family.

45. The United Nations is planning to support the provision of a single gateway facility, which, with a clear, non-technical menu system, should simplify access not only to databases, but also to other facilities, such as e-mail and bulletin boards, that are critical to meeting the goal of easy, user-friendly access. Provision of a gateway facility can be addressed in several different ways, and the United Nations intends, during the 1994-1995 biennium, to actively pursue implementation, commencing with identification and securing of the resources needed to proceed with full development.

VI. NEED FOR POLICY COORDINATION

46. It has become apparent that activities to date have been limited and rather uncoordinated, owing to the fact that there is not an appropriate coordinating mechanism at present among the various organizations and agencies of the United Nations system. Recognizing this, the Advisory Committee on Coordination (ACC) has created a senior-level task force to identify policy issues relating to coordination in the area of information. The task force has been charged, in light of its policy recommendations, to propose appropriate mandates, structures and secretariat arrangements for ACCIS and ICC. The task force will review and make policy recommendations on the general requirements for dissemination and exchange of information between Member States, including their permanent missions to the United Nations, and both the United Nations and the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, and the rest of the United Nations system. In addition, the task force will concern itself with ways and means of harmonizing and improving United Nations information systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States Members of the United Nations and organizations of the United Nations system, including inter-agency cooperation in the shared use of existing or planned information technology expertise and facilities. The task force report will be presented to ACC at its second regular session of 1993, to be held in October. Once the mandates of ACCIS and ICC have been modified to reflect the technological advances that have

occurred since each was established, the inter-agency infrastructure will be in place to ensure that the implementation of the above-mentioned Economic and Social Council resolutions no longer takes place piecemeal, but rather in a coordinated, phased approach.

Notes

1/ German Institute for Medical Documentation and Information.